

*When I Am Weak, I Am Strong*

There is really only one authentic Christian message, one genuine Christian gospel. That gospel is the Good News of Jesus Christ. That gospel can be expressed verbally or written in a number of different ways. One way is what St. Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, chapter 3, verses 25 and 26. In the ultra-modern *Message* Bible translation it reads, "God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world from sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear." Sometimes in our worship, our liturgy, we proclaim the gospel this way, "Christ had died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." Often I just say it, "We are put right with God through what Jesus has already done for us on the cross when we trust and cling to him."

There are other messages that get presented as the Christian gospel, but they are false, they are not genuine. I could list many such phony gospels. One is the Health and Wealth Gospel, that says if you just believe in Jesus hard enough, all your wishes for material and financial blessing will come true -- as if Jesus came into the world only to make us all rich. Another fake gospel is the Signs and Wonders movement, that says true believers must speak in tongues and perform miracles of healing, and maybe even handle snakes and drink arsenic, to show that they have the Holy Spirit. Again, this seems to assume that God's main concern is for entertaining us with gaudy shows of power. A particularly insidious kind of false gospel is the Social Gospel movement that reduces the Kingdom of God to a political platform, and this is found on both on the political left and the political right -- as if Jesus' goal is to get all of us to vote for the correct party, the correct candidate, and the

correct legislation. No, there is but one gospel and it is the message St. Paul preached about justification by grace through faith.

Paul himself had to deal with preachers of false gospels in his time even as we do today. He had preached freedom in Christ to the people of Corinth and founded a church there. But while Paul was away other preachers came in and led the Corinthians astray. They told the people that their relationship with God was based on their Jewish heritage and that it was necessary for them to be circumcised and follow all the other Mosaic laws to be saved. They were supplanting the Good News of salvation through faith in Christ with a notion of salvation by good works. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church to set them straight, but it was a tough fight.

Paul was fighting an uphill battle because the crooked preachers came in with impressive credentials. They were the proverbial experts, guys from out of town with briefcases. These pseudo-apostles boasted of their wisdom and knowledge, and these egomaniacs claimed to have had all types of spiritual visions and experiences that validated their teaching. They did attract big crowds by flattering people and telling them what they wanted to hear. They made a big show of how very holy, righteous, and spiritual they were. Sound familiar? Do these false teachers in Paul's day remind you of some of the preachers on the radio, TV, the Internet and in the bookstores today – the ones with the mega-churches and multimillion-dollar ministries? It was easy for the Corinthians to get foolishly misled by the flashy shows and persuasive messages presented by these slick preachers, just as so many people get hoodwinked that same way in our time.

What's ironic is that Paul himself had more credentials than all the false preachers put together. He was by birth a Jew, and he had been an extremely devout follower of the religious law as a member of the Pharisee party. Moreover, Paul had not only met with some of Christ's apostles face-to-face, he had had direct interaction with Jesus himself on the road to Damascus, as well as other spiritual experiences and visions that would outshine all the false preachers' claims put together. But Paul had always been very careful to not make himself the issue of his preaching. He didn't want to bowl anyone over with his eloquence. He didn't want to impress anybody with his resume. Paul didn't claim that his spiritual visions made him the one and only messenger of God's grace. Paul just wanted to present the gospel as clearly and simply as possible, and let the hearers decide for themselves without emotional manipulation or psychological coercion. And Paul wasn't doing this for his own profit, as many of the false preachers did.

Of course, Paul was not made of wood or stone; he had human emotions just as you and I do. So Paul couldn't help but roll around in the mud a little bit with the false preachers and try his hand at beating them at their own game. Basically Paul said, "You foolish Corinthians seem to enjoy listening to those foolish false preachers, so now I'll talk like a fool too and boast about my spiritual experiences to reach you on your own level." Paul then wrote about himself in the third person – he talks about someone he knows, but we can pretty sure he is really talking about himself – and he relates to them a vision of heaven he had where he heard things about which no mortal can speak. What could possibly trump that! But after that little boast Paul goes back to what he really wants to tell them and that is how God works through weak, fallible human vessels such as himself.

Recall for a moment the perils Paul faced for preaching the gospel: he had been arrested and beaten, he had been ship wrecked and bitten by a snake, several attempts had been made on his life and on more than one occasion he had been left for dead. Perhaps worst of all, he had be betrayed by friends and let down by the churches she started as they abandoned the gospel he preached for lies. You might think that God would treat His most trusted servant better. If the Health and Wealth Gospel were true, Paul would have been a rich man, as faithful as he was. If the Social Gospel were true, certainly Paul would have had friends on one side of the aisle or the other to look for him. And if only the Signs and Wonders movement was what Paul had been all about, he could have pulled off a few miracles to turn his own delicate health situation around.

Paul says that the Lord gave him a disability, a “thorn in his flesh,” to keep him from being too elated. What that thorn in his flesh, his physical ailment was, no body knows for sure, but there has been much speculation. I’m not sure knowing what it was really matters. The point is that God gave Paul a reminder that the good work he did as an ambassador for Christ was not his own achievement, rather it was God working through him. When we are successful at something, we tend to think it’s all our own doing. We become proud and pompous and think we have no need of God. Paul’s handicap, whatever it was, reminded him that he was not all-powerful, that he was not totally independent. It reminded him of his absolute dependence on God. We are all absolutely dependent on God for everything.

Our dependence on God is something we often don't think about until we have a health crisis or another kind of problem. When life is going along smoothly, it's easy for us to keep God on the margins of our lives. We don't have a need for Him so much then. But when a catastrophe hits, then we get forced to our knees, and we discover we really do need to seek God in prayer after all. A question we should all ask ourselves whenever we find ourselves in sickness or in some other desperate situation is, "What can I learn from this experience?"

Can our own problems make us more sensitive to the needs of others? Does our experience make us more eager to help someone else in need when we can? Does losing a physical ability we had or some possession we enjoyed teach us to not value the things of this world so highly? Can we learn to not have so many wants and desires, and learn how to let our mood be independent of our circumstances? When we receive help and care from others, does it remind us that ultimately it is God who sends us all things, without Him we could do nothing, and that in eternity He will care for us forever? As St. Paul knew so well, sickness and adversity can be a marvelous teacher – a tough teacher, but every effective.

That was undoubtedly part of Paul's success as an evangelist. To see a man with such a history, a man so beaten and broken in some ways, and yet so full of life and faith and hope, he had to be a compelling witness to Christ. It's a fine line we walk as messengers of Jesus. We want our worship to be worthy of the One we praise, the best we have to offer. We hope that many people will join with us in worship and want to be part of this Christian community. And we pray for the resources to do God's work in this place.

But we also know that if our emphasis becomes the beauty of our worship rather than on Christ its center, we've missed the mark. If membership numbers and dollars in the bank become more important to us than making disciples for Christ, we have failed miserably as Christians.

I sometimes wish that I was more eloquent in preaching, and had a better voice to sing the liturgy, and had a more commanding presence in the community. I sometimes wish our congregation had thousands of members and millions of dollars to spend on all sorts of ministries and programs. But we are who we are. We are who God made us to be. Despite our weaknesses and failings, God is using us. We are having impact for the gospel in this time and place, although we might not always realize it. God has a purpose for us and we are pouring ourselves out as an offering to Him, dedicating our lives to His service. Like Paul, when we are weak, we are strong. Our mission is made effective and we ourselves are made perfect, not by our efforts, but by Christ's. All praise and glory to him. Amen.